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ABSTRACT

The attitudes of college students toward diet and exercise were studied, with attention to whether attitudes varied by race and sex. A survey, which included items from the Eating Attitudes Test, was administered to 727 entering freshmen: 305 white females, 286 white males, 46 black females, and 38 black males. The findings showed that diet and exercise are relatively independent activities for men, but for women, they seem to be linked together as a means toward the common end of obtaining the ideal body type. White females were more concerned with diet and weight control than were black women or men of either race. Black men were most likely to exercise regularly, and white men were most likely to eat the same foods each day. This study, which was done on a general population of students, suggests that problems relating to diet, exercise, and body image may be widespread for women, and are an important part of their adjustment to college life. The findings may be useful to counselors and advisers. (Author/SW)

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SEX AND RACE DIFFERENCES IN DIETING AND EXERCISE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Paul R. Walters and William E. Sedlacek

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SUMMARY

A survey of 727 students showed that diet and exercise are relatively independent activities for men, but for women, they seem to be linked together as a means toward the common end of obtaining the ideal body type. White females were more concerned with diet and weight control than black women or men of either race. Black men were most likely to exercise regularly, and white men were most likely to eat the same foods each day.

An appreciation of the results of this study should be useful to those counseling, advising, providing services or developing programs for students.

A television commercial selling a brand of watches capitalizes on the changing American norm of ideal beauty by announcing "you can't be either too rich or too thin." Several lines of evidence have been used to document the trend over the last twenty years toward a thinner ideal body type (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980). Ironically, while the ideal body type is getting thinner, the actual average weight of Americans is increasing. Concurrent with this changing norm in ideal body type has been an increase in documented cases of disturbances in body image (Gray, 1977) and eating disorders (Duddle, 1973; Papalia & Bode, 1981) among college students. Garner and Garfinkel suggest that the discrepancy between ideal beauty and actual weight creates conditions where individuals actively pursue ideal beauty through dieting and exercise, and the eating disorders represent the extreme cases of this pursuit. The increasing number of diets and exercise programs published in popular magazines and paperback books are cited by Garner and Garfinkel as additional evidence of the increasing acceptance of these forms of activity among a growing proportion of the population.

Interesting aspects of this acceptance are the group differences in approach and practice of dieting and exercise. Among college students, women are more conscious of dieting and exercise and experience more discomfort about their dieting habits than men (Gondola & Tuckerman, 1982). It also appears that men engage in exercise for different reasons than women (Zuercher, Sedlacek, & Masters, 1982) in that men are hypothesized to seek out exercise for the competitiveness of the activity, whereas women are more inclined to exercise for its conditioning value. The purpose of this study is to investigate more closely the attitudes behind diet and exercise among college students, and whether these attitudes vary by race and sex.

Method

This study was conducted through a survey consisting of 64 items, 40 taken from the Eating Attitudes Test (Garner & Garfinkel, 1979) and 24 additional

items constructed specifically for this study. Of the 24 additional items, 5 were demographic (sex, race, height, weight, and age) or personal information, 9 items assessed eating habits, and 11 items concerned exercise. The survey was administered to 727 entering freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park (305 white females, 286 white males, 46 black females, 38 black males). Fifty two students of other races were not included in the analyses. Data were analyzed by fixed effects 2 way analyses of variance (sex by race) at the .05 level.

Results

Results showed that of the 64 analyses conducted, 51 were significant (48 main effects of sex, 22 main effects on race, and 7 interactions). As in previous research (Gordola & Tuckerman, 1982), women were much more self-conscious about their weight, dieting and food than men. Women were less satisfied with their body image than men, thinking of themselves as overweight, whereas men were more likely to consider themselves underweight. Women were much more likely than men to report a variety of dieting behaviors and concerns.

In terms of exercise, men differed from women in that they were more likely to exercise regularly and were more satisfied with their current level of activity than women. Men seemed to be looking forward to being involved in intramural sports, while women seemed more intent on exercising off campus or alone. When asked why they were not interested in being involved in athletics, men responded more often that they were uninterested in athletics, but women reported a feeling of embarrassment or lack of ability.

Racial differences were considerably fewer than sexual differences. However, the racial differences do serve as an interesting comparitive point on the sex differences reported above. Whites tend to eat more diet food, engage in dieting behavior, and experience more concern over eating than blacks. In terms of exercising, whites belong to health clubs or spas more than blacks, but little else

was found to distinguish the races on exercising behavior.

The interaction on sex and race found in this study isolates white females as the group most concerned with dieting and food. Black men are most likely to exercise regularly and white men are most likely to eat the same foods day after day.

Discussion

The attitudinal differences between sexes found in this study are consistent with previous differences found between men and women (Condola & Tuckerman, 1982). Women are more concerned about dieting and exercise in terms of their physical appearance, whereas men report more satisfaction with their appearance, activity level, and eating habits. A general interpretation of these results is that diet and exercise are relatively independent activities for men, but for women they seem to be linked together as a means toward the common end of obtaining the ideal body type.

Racial differences found in this study highlight white females as the group most concerned with dieting and the most likely to experience concern about weight. These data support the clinical observations that white females under age 25 are at greatest risk for eating disorders and body image disturbances (Anderson, 1979). That this study was done on a general population of students suggests that problems relating to diet, exercise, and body image may be widespread for women, and are an important part of their adjustment to college life.

An appreciation of the results of this study should be useful to those counseling, advising, providing services or developing programs for students.

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